RAT WARS: IN ASTORIA, RODENTS GO WITH THE TERRITORY

Source of the Story: KATIE FRANKOWICZ The Daily Astorian 2-23-2018

Summary of Events: It is absolutely a fact that when a rat charges down a city tunnel at you it is the size of a buffalo. Why else would you flail around with your flashlight like a beam of light will protect you? You didn't even know your voice could go so high.

Thousands of tiny rodent footprints dot the ground in the tunnels below downtown Astoria. Maybe that's just one very industrious rat, Ken Nelson, the city's public works superintendent, suggested. It's possible, right? There could just be one rat down there pacing frantically back and forth.
Sorry. Rats are absolutely in the city's sewer system, where they find both shelter and a steady supply of food. "They're the little garbage men of the sewer," Nelson said. He himself has been charged by a rat roughly the size of a St. Bernard.

Salem, Portland and Eugene are seeing an uptick in urban rat numbers this year. In Astoria, they never left. Some downtown businesses and property owners report several rat sightings this winter. They theorize extra high waters associated with king tides pushed rats out of their usual hiding places.
Though few people want a rat in their basement or business, rats and river towns go hand in hand — and 70 years ago, rats were seen as a big enough problem that Astoria leaders implemented a citywide extermination program.

Rat wars in 1948, Clatsop County was one of 22 other their investigations, the committee members noticed a lot of overflowing garbage around town, backyard refuse heaps and vacant lots piled high with junk. They argued for a permanent program to deal with rats. The localities across the nation selected for a demonstration on how to deal with outsized rat populations, according to newspaper reports from the time.

That February, the Astoria City Council received a letter from a county health inspector and a county sanitation officer who said Astoria needed a rat control campaign. The city is a "seaport, accessible to rats bringing disease from abroad," they warned, and "the presence of underground passages and sewers opening on the waterfront encourage the development of a big rat population."

County officials recommended a twofold war: Attack obvious food sources, then attack the rats themselves. They suggested Astoria also implement compulsory garbage disposal, improve care of city dump sites, campaign against dumping garbage outside of the city dump and approach private property owners and businesses about rat proofing their buildings and homes.

At one point, more than 10,000 rats were killed at city dump sites in Astoria and Warrenton, victims of the "deadliest rat poison ever developed." Astoria and other cities across Clatsop County officially declared war on the rats in mid-April.

Baited with poison two "rat-killing experts," employees with the federal wildlife service, traveled to Astoria to provide demonstrations. Their tools were repurposed apple crates baited with poison. People would later blame a sudden rash of dog deaths on this very same poison, but one expert pointed out that the apple crate death boxes were specifically constructed to keep pets away from the bait.

Rat wars: Astoria baits 38 manholes every month to keep the rat population down in the sewer system
Astoria Mayor Orval Eaton assembled a committee to look at how to control the rat population. In items they wanted to include in a city ordinance hewed closely to what the county officials had suggested.
By the 1950s, Astoria declared itself victorious over the rats. In 1950, E.T. Christenson, a member of the mayor's rat control committee and plant manager of the Astoria-Pillsbury flour mill, reported it was rare to see a rat in the city dump or along the waterfront. The next year, the head of a Portland firm Astoria contracted with for rat control work estimated the rat population in Astoria had been reduced to 50 percent.

"But the fight against rats must be maintained steadily and conducted everywhere in town," he said. "If efforts were relaxed in just one downtown block, so that the rats could find food and harborage, they would increase amazingly."

'Go with the territory' Rat drama has died down over the decades, but aspects of the war continue.

Rats are the No. 1 pest A& A Pest Control technicians deal with on the coast, followed closely by ants and wood-boring beetles. The company is based out of Portland but has an office in Clatsop County.

Reports of a rat infestation usually begin with a frantic call, technician Enrique Nieves said. When he goes to inspect a house, his first step is to try and figure out how rats are getting in.

"My rule of thumb is the rule of thumb," he said. "If your thumb can fit in a hole, a rat can basically squish down and fit into that hole.

Astoria baits 38 manholes every month to keep the rat population down in the sewer system. One residence contacts the Public Works Department nearly every month about rat problems. Nelson suspects something there continues to attract rats. When there are complaints about rats in a specific area, city staff will bait the nearest manhole.

The city's building staff occasionally gets complaints from neighbors of abandoned or empty houses and properties attracting vermin. "There is little", said Ben Small, Astoria's building and code enforcement official, "We can do other than contact the property owner and remind them it is their responsibility to make sure a building is closed up and secure".

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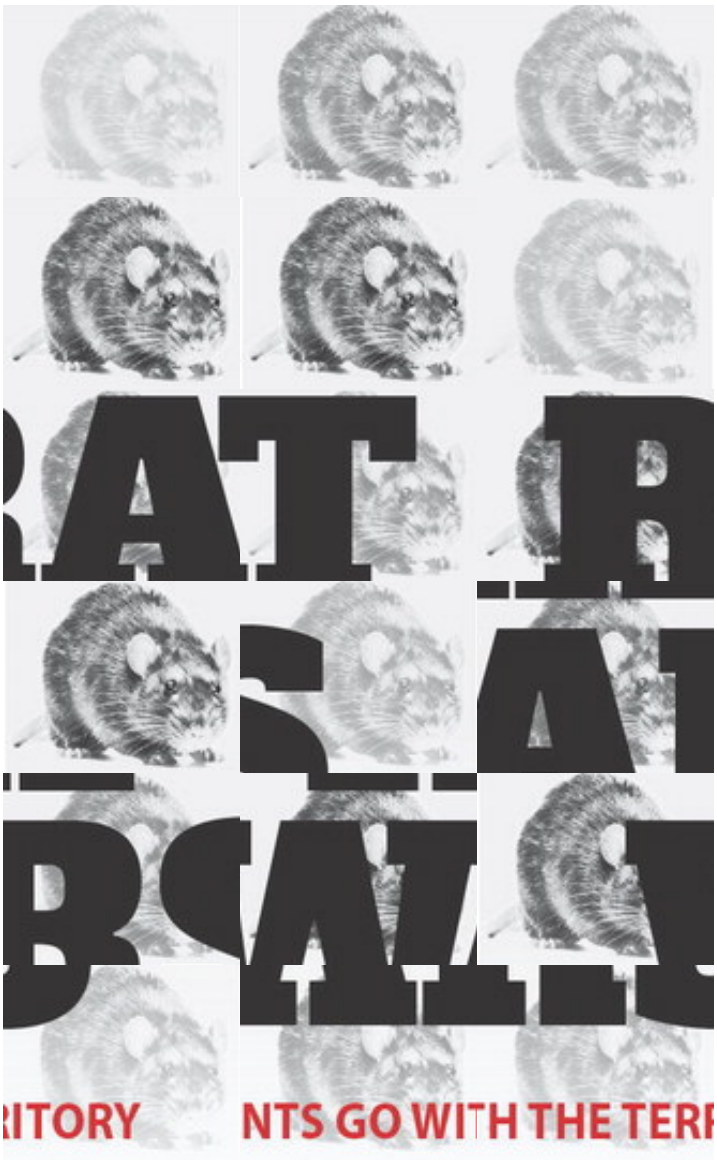

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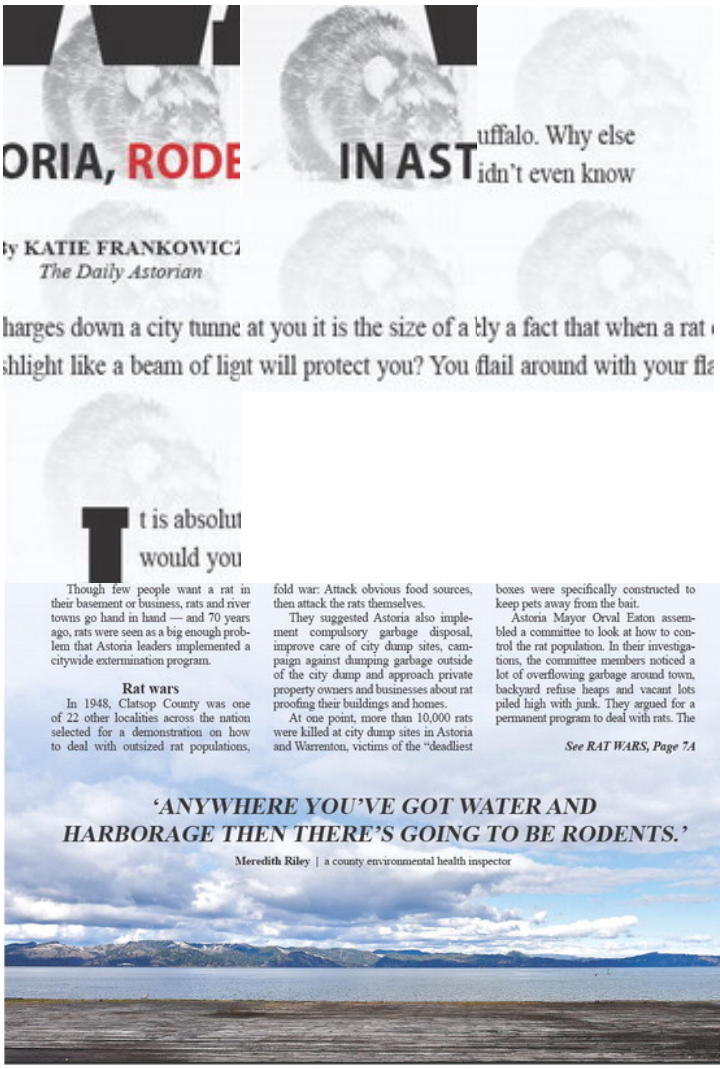
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There is no way to estimate the size of Astoria's rat population. All Nelson knows is that one month, a block of rat poison at one manhole might be completely untouched. The next month, three blocks might disappear. Sometimes, a rat will suddenly run in front of cameras the city uses to inspect sewers and groom itself before scampering farther up the line.

There are stories about people who heard splashing in their bathroom and found a rat swimming in the toilet, and county health inspectors occasionally find evidence of rats in the restaurants they inspect. But that's Astoria.

"Anywhere you've got water and harborage then there's going to be rodents," said Meredith Riley, a county environmental health inspector. "They just kind of go with the territory."

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